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## **‘A View from Old Age’: Women’s lives as narrated through objects**

### **Abstract:**

This article uses interview data gathered during a collaborative cross-disciplinary project undertaken in 2016 to explore experiences of longevity in qualitative detail with a small cohort of Northern Irish participants. The project was inspired by Penelope Lively’s novel (2013: 4, 199), *Ammonites and Leaping Fish: A life in time*, which documented the author’s feelings about her life through focused reflections on her own possessions. Lively, chose objects which she felt ‘oddly identified’ her life and proposed that ‘people’s possessions speak of them’. We devised a series of activities to be undertaken with participants over the age of sixty, with the intention of using material things as a lens on longevity. In this article we use interview data with three female participants to analyse women’s narration of their own biographies. The aim of this article is to explore the role of the possessions in narrating women’s lives and to consider how themes of ageing, memory, relationships and the self are articulated through objects. The theoretical context for this exploratory work refers to cultural gerontology, material culture studies, gender studies and scholarship on life history. We conclude that objects offer a useful, tangible means of articulating and communicating the complexity of women’s longevity.

**Keywords:** longevity, ageing, gender, objects, life history

This article uses interview data gathered during a collaborative cross-disciplinary project undertaken in 2016 to explore experiences of longevity in qualitative detail with a small cohort of Northern Irish participants. While the ageing population is seldom out of the news, reports tend towards the one dimensional. News stories swing between horror at the mistreatment of residents in care homes to dismissal of older people as ‘greedy’ for having ‘stolen their children’s future’ (Malik, 2011). Reporters rarely speak directly to those with the experience of living a long life. One outcome of simplistic reasoning in public debate is the absence of an informed discussion about *what it actually means to live a long life*. It is hoped that the methods trialled during this project, and its initial findings, can contribute to enriching and enlivening debates about the meanings of old age.

The narration of a life through objects provided the inspiration for this project. Specifically, Penelope Lively’s novel (2013: 4, 199), *Ammonites and Leaping Fish: A life in*

*time*, which documented the author's feelings about her life through focused reflections on her own possessions. Lively chose objects which she felt 'oddly identified' her life and proposed that 'People's possessions speak of them'. A group of researchers and practitioners took up Lively's proposal, devised a series of activities to be undertaken with participants over the age of sixty, with the intention of using material things as a lens on longevity. Over a period of twelve months, three women and three men were involved in a multi-disciplinary project which began by asking them to choose six things in their possession that said 'something of who I am.' The participants were recruited through the authors' networks established through the ARK Ageing Programme (see [ark.ac.uk/ageing](http://ark.ac.uk/ageing)) and through project collaborator, Lorraine Calderwood, in her role with the Arts and Older People Programme at Arts Council Northern Ireland.<sup>1</sup> An individual interview was conducted with each person. Four weeks later, they met as a group and worked with visual artist, Gemma Hodge, to explore the materiality of their chosen objects at an arts workshop.<sup>2</sup> The project culminated in a public exhibition, entitled 'Something of Who I Am' which displayed their objects, quotations from the interviews and Hodge's interpretation of their objects.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the exhibition provided a finale to the project's activities, the path taken and the end result were left open and what resulted was the product of close collaboration between researchers, practitioners and participants. The third author ran a reflective focus group with participants one month following the exhibition.

Here, the analysis focuses on the three individual interviews with female participants, each taking between an hour and an hour and a half to conduct. The aim of this article is to explore the role of the possessions in narrating these women's lives and to consider how themes of ageing, memory, relationships and the self are articulated through objects. The theoretical context for this exploratory work refers to cultural gerontology, material culture studies, gender studies and scholarship on life history.

### **The View from Old Age in Gerontology**

Feminist gerontologists have written about the experience of ageing from a woman's point of view for decades (Arber and Ginn, 1991; Calasanti, 2006; 2007; 2010; 2016; Cruikshank, 2003; Estes, Biggs and Phillipson, 2003; Gullette, 1997; 2013; Laws, 1995; Ray, 2007; Woodward, 2003). Some of the 'baby boomer' generation of the 1960s had experience of second wave feminist activism earlier in the lifecourse and have subsequently chosen to write about their own ageing (Hanson, 2013; King, 2013; Segal, 2013). As a result there is now a

growing and exciting literature in the humanities and social science branches of gerontology in which women use feminist methods (including narration) to write about their own and their societies' ageing (Applewhite, 2016; Garner, 1999; Gullette, 2013, 2017; Ray-Karpen, 2017; Woodspring, 2016). Their work speaks directly to the theme of this special issue; the social context and meaning of women's private lives.

Feminist writing about old age has a pedigree which extends at least as far back as the work of Beauvoir *The Coming of Age* (1970) and Friedan's (1993) *Fountain of Age*. These *grandes dames* of feminism found that personal experience of growing older prompted them to write about ageism (Sonntag, 1972). Though now focused on ageism, their motivation came from the same place as Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*; to name and claim their experience of discrimination. More recent work by boomers such as Applewhite (2016) comes from a similar place. In each case, the story of women's later lives is placed in a political context, particularly in terms of women's rights. These women's narrations are imbued with a sense of gender relations having shaped their life experience, including the experience of growing older. For Friedan (1993) and De Beauvoir (1970) their experience of ageism mirrors earlier experiences of sexism. This study is informed by this literature and sees the personal as political in the sense outlined by De Beauvoir and Friedan.

### *Growing Recognition of Lived Experience in Gerontology*

Amongst gerontologists, the personal has become an increasingly important factor in research that seeks to understand the experience of growing older (Carney and Gray, 2015; Carney, 2017; Gilleard, 2018). In 2017, for the first time since it was first published in 1961, flagship journal *The Gerontologist* published a special issue 'Aging – it's personal' in which older gerontologists were asked to write about the relationship between their personal ageing and their research and teaching in gerontology (Pruchno, 2017). Meanwhile, in British gerontology, a Leverhulme Trust funded project *The Ageing of British Gerontology* 'explores the evolution of the study of ageing in Britain from 1971 to the present day.'<sup>4</sup> Bernard and her team have interviewed and photographed fifty leading researchers in the UK about their personal and professional experiences of ageing. Their respondents display an ambivalence towards accepting their own ageing, and an acknowledgement that academic knowledge of ageing is sometimes useless in the context of personal experience of growing older. This acknowledgement of the role of the personal as relevant to understanding ageing is long

overdue, particularly given that living a long life is now an expected feature of life in the countries in question (UK and US). It may indicate that the lived experience of ageing by researchers themselves is beginning to make even gerontologists see that the vulnerability of ageing stems as much from personal experience such as the dying off of one's 'co-biographers' (Hagestad and Stettersten, 2017) as it does from physiological changes. The more nuanced understanding of what it actually means to live a long life that is emerging from recent scholarship is raising new questions for a discipline that has been dominated by resource-focused issues such as 'how will we fund the care of 'the elderly'? The fact that 'the elderly' - that amorphous and undifferentiated mass of the old - is a fictional whole that exists only in the minds of the commentator is becoming apparent. Lively's memoir (2013) voices frustration with the homogenising of 'older people'; 'All that we have in common, we in this new demographic, are our aches and pains and disabilities... For the rest of it, we are the people we have always been - splendidly various, and let us respect that' (Lively, 2013: 21). It would seem that there is a growing chasm between the experience of ageing, and how it is perceived in the wider population. The self-reported distance between the lived experience of old age, and the wholesale appropriation of 'old age' as a *bad thing* by mass media motivated Friedan (1993) and latterly, Lively (2013: 3) to write about their experiences: 'One of the few advantages of age is that you can report on it with a certain authority; you are a native now, and know what goes on here.'

The distance between the experience of ageing, and its study was clear to the gerontologists who contributed to the special issue 'Aging - it's personal'. In some cases, the impact of personal experience on understanding of ageing was profound. For example, behavioural psychologist Schiedt (2017) was humbled by the experience of ageing. 'Now I am experiencing my own aging... I share a few observations and thoughts about my daily struggle to preserve a healthy sense of self amidst this thievery of my personhood by *ageism*' (Scheidt, 2017: 110).

### *The Uniquely Illuminating Perspective of Ageing Feminists*

Elsewhere, Carney has claimed that the ageing feminists within the cohorts of baby boomers have a uniquely useful set of experiences (Carney and Gray, 2015; Carney, 2017). Having lived through the changes brought about by the activism of the women's movement, these women have a particularly politicised perspective on life. They also have the powers of

description, the tools and the language to articulate how life looks from the viewpoint of the oppressed. A leader in the gerontology of the humanities, Ruth Ray has published widely as a feminist gerontologist (Ray, 1999; 2004). She was also one of those who wrote an essay for the ‘Aging – it’s personal’ special issue for *The Gerontologist*. In her essay, Ray (now Ray Karpen) focuses on women’s experiences of retirement, specifically noting the inequalities between women and acknowledging her privilege as belonging to what she refers to as: ‘The Top 20%’ of women’ - those who are the first women to retire after a long career and with a decent pension (Ray Karpen, 2017: 103). She asks: ‘What will they be doing all those years? Given their strong attachments to paid work and its rewards, what will take its place? How might they use this time to redefine the meaning and purpose of retirement?’ Ray Karpen’s responses to these questions offer a number of insights on the experience of ageing, which are shared with the women whose lives are narrated in this article.

Ageing is full of contradictions. It is simultaneously a status and a stage of life. It is intensely personal, conflicted, challenging and rewarding, which goes some way to explaining the relationship between feminist thinking and the study of ageing, as both necessarily embrace ambiguity in relation to personal experience. The Janus-faced nature of the experience of living a long life is often ignored in both science and culture. Popular media present polarised images of serenity, wisdom and financial security, or of loss, impairment and decline. Neither of these images captures the whole, which is, more likely, composed of elements of both, mixed with other random, as yet unidentified factors. Drawing on the work of Martha Holstein (2006), Karpen Ray (2017: 104) acknowledges this ambiguity in terms of women’s retirement: ‘it is a complex emotional, psychological, and spiritual process that changes over time, and it involves various types of work, both paid and unpaid.’ The life courses narrated by the Lively Project women are full of similarly challenging experiences. The objects that they use to communicate these transitions shed an important light on the intensely complex and personal struggle that it is to be a woman, trying to make one’s way in the world, particularly after many decades of life where one’s personal history mirrors the historical and social changes one has lived through.

### **Narrating Age through Things**

In asking participants to tell something of themselves through objects that they own, this research necessarily engages with biography, narration and the methodological issues of

analysing life stories (Bertaux, 1981; Tedlock, 1983; Denzin, 1989; Bateson, 1990; Josselson and Liebeck, 1995). As William Tierney (2000: 539) reminds us, 'Life history is a culturally produced artifact in one light and an interpretive document in another.' The juxtaposition of artefact and document in this statement is significant. Whilst objects are redolent, it suggests that they do not offer the clarity of text. For many scholars in the humanities and social sciences, firmly wedded to language as evidence of human thought and action, material things still present certain analytical challenges (see for example Auslander 2005). However, work in the fields of anthropology, science studies and philosophy has sought to overcome the division between mind and matter (subject and object) and demonstrate the agency of things in our social worlds (Harman, 2002; Latour, 2005; Henare, Holbraad and Wastell, 2007; Bogost, 2012). Or, as Arjun Appadurai (1988: 5) famously put it:

we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things. Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.

Further, interdisciplinary research is beginning to show the ways in which interactions that involve object handling, conversation and reflection can have specific effects on cognitive functioning. Research has variously attributed better educational (Paris 2002, Chatterjee and Hannan 2015), health and wellbeing (Thomson and Chatterjee 2014, Solway et al. 2016) outcomes to multi-sensory engagements with objects.

As more researchers, from diverse traditions, are drawn to the use of objects in their research practice, approaches that are self-conscious about their interpretive frameworks are particularly helpful. The study of objects as evidence necessitates a negotiation between the experiential and the intellectual, which is particularly intense in circumstances where items have been in a person's possession for many years. As archaeologist Carl Knappett has emphasised (2011: 12): 'Things establish themselves in ways that are not entirely comprehensible, and they exert a powerful hold on human social and cognitive dynamics.' By asking participants to discuss their lives through the things that they own, this project initiated a complex set of interactions: between researcher and researched; sensory and symbolic; object and memory; memory and narrative and so on (Chatterjee 2008). These

interactions are all contingent on time and place, but - as Maruška Svašek (2007) has argued – where people and objects move across time and space, objects offer the opportunity to overcome distances and to re-create the familiar, whilst undergoing shifts in meaning and emotional resonance. The potential of objects to jump register: to connect to distant times and places and to do so with particular sensory, emotional and cognitive implications is particularly helpful for the study of gender and ageing.

The interviews analysed here were undertaken in the homes of the participants and the objects chosen referred directly to domestic space – whether that was present or past homes. In two of the three cases, the participant was in a process of transition – having moved from or moving to a new home and was therefore already engaged in a process of sorting and selecting possessions. As Miller (2008: 2) tells us, people:

put up ornaments; they laid down carpets. They selected furnishing and got dressed that morning. Some things may be gifts or objects retained from the past, but they have decided to live with them, to place them in lines or higgledy-piggledy ... These things are not a random collection.

Of course, many people's homes represent a struggle with objects and space - where compromises have been made over decades with the material whole departing significantly from the inhabitants' intentions. Some objects that are meaningful to an individual are, at the same time, disruptive.

Discussion of the objects we choose to display in our homes (and the meanings these selections have for our identities) often focuses on their aesthetic or utilitarian dimensions. As Sherry Turkle rightly highlights (2007: 5), 'We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought.' This is a productive way of thinking about the role of objects when they are used in the narration of life histories. Moreover, as literary scholar James Krasner has argued in his study of spatialised memory in the homes of the elderly (2005: 227), 'understanding metaphorical self-representation' in domestic material accumulation can help carers and gerontologists to weigh up the psychological benefits or detriments of staying in the home. As Krasner acknowledges (2005: 210), qualitative gerontology has found 'that long time home residence represents a crucial imaginative structure through which elders define themselves and their life stories', especially for those who live alone. In the object-based interviews analysed here, chosen possessions act in a number of ways – sometimes as lightning rods for a particular



time or place, a memory, and at others as signifiers of the self or an achievement. Sometimes the participants talked past their possessions, but often they spoke through them.

Given the importance of the home in the way possessions are stored, used and prioritised, it is worth noting the status of each participant in relation to their domestic space at the time of the interview. One participant (Mary) had relocated recently and had moved into a temporary, rented home while she looked for a property to buy in her new city. Of the seven objects she selected, six had come with her to the rented house, which she regarded as significant of their meaning to her. Other of her possessions remained in storage. Another participant (Penny) was in the process of selling the house she had lived in for fifty-four years and was assessing the possessions she had in preparation for this transition. She said that she had welcomed the invitation to participate in this project because she was already involved in a process of sorting her possessions. The third participant (Ruth), by contrast, remained in a home she had lived in for decades and had not engaged in any recent sorting or ‘de-cluttering’. Ruth described her home as ‘an installation’, equating home furnishing with artistic expression, and hers was the most materially crowded domestic space of the three.

**Table 2: Participants and their Objects**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Home</b>	<b>Objects</b>
Mary Duffy	62	Moved recently from another city.	Mother’s dresser Teddy from childhood Ornament – gift from children Plastic flower from father’s hospital bed Book in Irish language Bike – gift from children Digital image of grandchildren
Penny Nugent	80	In the process of leaving home of 50 years.	Silver spoon (late sister’s) Passport from youth Manicure set from husband Nappy pin (children) Toby Jug (father’s) Memory quilt (made of her mother’s clothes)

Ruth McRory	61	Living in same house for decades	Handmade doll (son's) Photo collage Circus programme Yarn bombing balaclava Drumming band tabard

### The Object-Based Narratives of Three Women

The interviews with three women discussed here offer a glimpse of the diverse and revealing ways lives can be told when objects anchor a conversation. The transcripts illuminate three distinct responses to the object-based approach and the narratives that prevail negotiate the presence of objects in different ways. For participant Mary, the choice of objects was based on instinct, leading to a very solid sense that these were *the* objects that traced her life:

[I chose my objects] immediately, absolutely immediately and I didn't waiver then, I thought those ones are among the chosen few. ... there's all sorts of things that I could've chosen I suppose, that would have set off all sorts of trains of thought in different directions and brought up all sorts of different issues.

Mary was keen to stress that she was neither sentimental nor 'an accumulative person', offering her tendency to let go of things rather than hold onto them as evidence of the intense meaning of her chosen things. By contrast, participants Penny and Ruth thought first about the aspects of their life they wished to characterise and then considered which possessions could speak to those times, places or relationships. Penny was chronologically focused: 'Well, I try to think of each era of my life, I'm 80 now. I was thinking of my childhood and then my teenage years and early married life and then my career.' Whereas, Ruth's selections emphasised activities in her adult life of which she felt proud, whether that was early motherhood, her professional achievements or pastimes that had been rewarding. She articulated the process of choosing as follows: 'Right, number four is probably travel. The other two, one is travel and one is my band and the other is my yarn bombing. ... Right, so those are my chosen areas.' So from the start of the interview, very different patterns were in progress, patterns that related strongly to narrative structure – a conscious process of sifting that could produce a desired result.

It is worth acknowledging here that this decision-making was to a lesser or greater extent guided by the request that had been made of the participants. By asking them to think about their lives in relation to different possessions, an object per life stage was strongly implied as a method of selection. But likewise, the guidance notes asked participants whether objects reflected particular passions or interests, proffering the suggestion of an alternative organisational approach. As the telling of life histories relates closely to the sense of self, the request itself asked a lot of the participants in terms of their commitment to discuss deeply held feelings. Furthermore, by structuring the interview around objects, the process harnessed the material, symbolic, tactile, temporal and interpersonal meanings that are so often located in domestic possessions. The interview also placed an emphasis on relating the material presentation of a given thing to a range of memories or feelings.

To take the first of these issues, the participants sometimes referred directly to materiality. Mary commented that ‘Things that we keep close to us are things that we really want to hold onto, over and above the stuff that goes through our life’ – emphasising tactile proximity and personal will with the phrase ‘holding onto’. Likewise, some objects were redolent of a very particular time in life, a childhood toy was described as synonymous with that life stage for one participant: ‘That really pins me down’. Penny’s testimony celebrated the materiality of certain objects. She described in captivating detail the discovery made by her relation of an old box of letters:

He and his young son were down there one day, and they noticed on the wall, the outline of a cupboard that had been papered over and they opened [it] up and he was quite excited to find this old tin box. Thought he’d maybe discovered the family fortune in there. ... And was very disappointed to find a bundle of old letters that had been stitched together.

Penny became very involved with these letters and ‘spent a year or two years transcribing them all.’ A not inconsiderable task of converting old paper and ink into a published text:

They had been stitched together that they were higgledy piggledy, they weren’t in order and you had to try and match the paper with the writing and the year. I finally got permission from his wife, ... she allowed me to take the stitching out at the side and open the letters out that I could put them into better order.

By taking an object-based approach, certain episodes in life (such as the transcription of letters) were foregrounded over others. The object was not always decisive in the inclusion of

recollections about a very significant life event – like having a child - but in some cases it was. In her interview, Penny remained alert to the losses that occur when the material is replaced by the digital, commenting of passports ‘they’ve lost all their kind of meaning ... haven’t they? They’ve become so electronic and everything’ and regretting that the large school bell she had rung in the playground as a teacher had most likely been replaced by ‘somebody pressing a button’. These reflections, somewhat removed from the main thrust of the narrative, speak to the sensory engagement generated by the process of choosing, handling and talking about personal possessions throughout the interview.

The materiality of some objects came through more strongly than others and the most acute example of this was in relation to an item that had been partially destroyed. Mary’s first object was a teddy bear: ‘I was really, really attached and he came everywhere with me and he did do, he still remained with me all the time until a dog came and ate him.’ In describing her teddy’s life before his encounter with the dog, Mary said:

Yes, I suppose that originally he was covered in this nice, yellow fur. I actually never remember him like that. I remember him being pretty baldy and battered as you can see. ... Unless it’s just affection, years and year of being stroked and fondled and all the rest of it, this is what it does to a teddy bear, I don’t know. ... he’s just much loved you see. Love comes at a cost too.

The dramatic loss of material form of an object that had been ‘held onto’, ‘stroked and fondled’ for years and which was regarded as the only surviving memento of early childhood had been devastating and its ongoing status as damaged was clearly troubling to Mary: ‘somethings if you fix them, they’re actually not the same. They have more integrity as the damaged original as the repaired thing, do you know?’ In the end, Mary enacted her own repair to the bear’s face in time to display him in the project exhibition. Her mending was done lightly and reversibly and, hopefully, in such a way as retained its original character. The care that Mary took in retaining the teddy’s characterful ageing may offer some explanation of what she meant by ‘the cost of love’; she wanted the wear and tear of decades of giving and receiving love to show on the teddy.

All three participants presented at least one photograph as part of their chosen things. In the case of Ruth and Penny these photos were physical artefacts – either the product of film or printed digital images. The first object that Ruth presented was a clown doll, named Spike, which she had made for her infant son, but to underline the meaning of this object she

produced a photograph of herself, her son and the doll. This image was taken on film and had been a chance discovery some years after it had been taken:

my father died, and for some reason you have this flurry of clearing things out, ... and I came upon two little undeveloped canisters of film. ... in the black and white set, ... and at the very end of the reel there was this one and another one, which I also have developed upstairs, and they're.. I don't know what the word is, whether they're over exposed or whatever is wrong with them, but they are like that. They're almost like a silhouette and I just loved it, ..... I thought it was like art, really.. It em, it lives beside my bed and so does another one, ... the two at the end of the film. ... Yes, he's holding Spike and we're having a conversation.

In this episode the materiality of the photograph is very present, the technology behind its creation contributing an element of chance to its creation and discovery. However, it is in the three silhouetted figures that Ruth found most material meaning as it was the photograph rather than doll itself that sat by her bedside. Again, the emphasis on choosing objects in this interview scenario had prompted different repertoires of reflection, ones which considered the accumulation of personal possessions and their meanings over time.

Mary presented one digital photograph as her final object, apologising for not having had it printed. In this case, the different kinds of proximity brought by a digital image were discussed: 'this photo was taken by my son and he Whatsapp'd it to me and I was abroad at the time when it arrived and I thought, "Oh that's lovely", so it is part of that inter-connectedness too you know?' This speaks to the way older women have engaged with dramatic changes in communications technology, proactively adopting in some instances and in others registering caution.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Mary argued that 'objects can sort of carry an awful lot more meaning' than photographs. By contrast both Penny and Ruth used photographs flexibly alongside three-dimensional objects to bring to the fore the associations they found most compelling. For example, Penny had 'looked out photographs' in order to make a small, silver spoon belonging to her sister who had died in childhood 'more meaningful'. Ruth took this approach further – she drew on her existing practice of arranging photographs and images in collages and displaying them in her home to help her construct the narrative of her adult life, much of the transcript relying on photographic illustration of particular episodes over and above the material presence of a particular artefact. For Ruth, the visual and the material were highly inter-related.

Without so many images to rely upon, objects occupied a more central role in prompting time and location-specific memories for Mary and Penny. As Mary reports, her teddy bear acted as a gateway to early childhood and her repetition of the phrases ‘it’s the only thing’ and ‘I’ve nothing else ... nothing’ seems significant.

If I did want to think about my childhood, it would be through different things with the bear.....that would bring me back there, you know, it’s like a kind of a touch stone? And it takes me right back and it’s the only thing I have.....yeah, it is absolutely the only thing I have ... I’ve nothing else from that period in my life, nothing.

Sometimes these connections were drawn through a close relationship. Penny reports the purchase of a Toby jug for her father and the way she saw him in its expression: ‘But I just spied it and I thought, it just reminded me of my Father. He had a very quirky sense of humour ... he really was very fond of it’. She likewise locates this object in a domestic space and remembering the way it looked in that place offers further insight into her father’s character:

it sat up on top of a china cabinet and we didn’t have electricity, until I was about 16.. So he didn’t put the lights on very early in the evening, that would be two years later. So it sat there and by the light of the fire, he imagined that the face was sort of winking at him or, he said, ‘He winked at me’, when you talked to him.

Had Penny been asked about her father rather than about objects that were important to her, it is doubtful that the interview would have recorded this memory of the Toby jug and how it appeared in the firelight at home. But it is in Penny’s description of its winking expression and the way that linked her to memories of her father that we gain particular insight into the quality of both her childhood experience and this parent-child relationship. The Toby jug is a good example of how objects can offer a tangible link backwards in time to a lost loved one, a former relationship or a formative experience.

The participants’ selections of objects had slightly different biases. All three chose objects that primarily represented a relationship, although Mary did this more consistently than Penny or Ruth and Ruth was the least likely to tie her objects to specific relationships. All the participants chose at least one object that signified a personal or professional achievement and Ruth was particularly focused on this as a way of organising her life narrative. Objects were also chosen across the piece that represented independent action,

creativity or adventure (a passport, a bike, travel souvenirs). These sat alongside others that were symbolic of domesticity (a nappy pin, a dresser, a child's doll). None of the objects were especially valuable in either monetary or aesthetic terms and many were quite the opposite, small and potentially insignificant things that had come to accumulate personal meaning. Likewise, Penelope Lively had imagined seeing her own chosen objects at a car boot sale – removed from the context of her memories and connections, they would instantly become mundane.

Mary's choice of an artificial flower fixed into a small glass vase, prompted a reflection on the relationship it represented but also on the counter-intuitive aesthetic connotations of the object. The flower was purchased when Mary was on her way to visit her father in hospital with the idea in mind that it would 'humanise his little environment'. Mary was very close to her father who she describes as 'an absolutely wonderful man.' She explains the moment of purchase as follows:

And you know the way in shopping centres, they have these kind of stalls in the middle of the mall, ... and some of them are little things like this and some are large, big things, absolutely horrendous, I don't know who's buying them, but I just wanted to pick up something to put [by his bed]. And I just saw this and I just thought, ok that's a little red flower, it's going to be cheerful and slightly gaudy and very tacky, but so what, there it is!

In reflecting on the objectionable nature of the artificial flower, Mary asserts 'Actually I cannot bear artificial flowers. I cannot bear them, I hate them, I abhor them!' Yet she bought the flower and has kept it with her ever since. She concludes: 'so that will tell you the intensity of the emotion that's behind this, that I'm prepared to put up with an artificial flower, you know?' The disjuncture between Mary's dislike of artificial flowers and the very powerful feelings this red flower provokes reflects aspects of this time and the particularities of the relationship. Whilst her father was 'wonderful' 'he was [also] a very old fashioned man and he just did not talk about his emotions at all.' The purchase of the artificial flower was prompted by the thought that fresh flowers would be purposeless because 'he was going to be impervious one way or another'. Perhaps the prospect of fresh flowers seemed less appealing because of their short life, or maybe the bright colour of this artificial flower felt bold enough to break through the sterile atmosphere of the hospital, to 'humanise' it in some way. Mary remembered thinking:

ok, it's a little flower and it's going to sit on his locker and it's going to be.. I don't know, an individual thing. Anyway I brought it in, I don't know if he took any notice of it at all, but it was there until he came home

The very presence of the flower – perhaps unnoticed - was important in this instance and that became the case later when Mary brought it back to her own home. This part of the interview brings into focus women's subtle negotiations with the material world and the way meaning attaches to objects through their roles in significant relationships and moments in life. It is this process of meaning-making that makes objects such powerful interpretive tools in a life history interview, both for the researcher and the interviewee.

In different ways, both Ruth and Penny engaged creatively with material representations of their lives. Ruth created collages out of photographs and other flat, visual materials:

I used to do one every year, latterly I do it every 2 or 3 years. This one was done quite recently and it has some old pictures in it, from way back and it also has more recent pictures... it has a selection of different bits of my life.

Whilst these collages and other collected photographs documented Ruth's life, she explained these periods of time through the people she knew and worked with. Whereas, Penny's memory quilt made at the time of her mother's death was focused very much on what her mother had worked on during her lifetime. Penny explains: 'After she'd died. I'm left with this heap of clothes to throw out, you know. I think the back was her dressing gown or something.' The end result is a patchwork of fabrics and references to her mother's passions:

She was a great one for alpine flowers and she, even in her 80's, was visiting Boulder, Colorado and going up mountains and looking at the plants and flowers.....this is the Red Cross. She was a great woman for chocolate cake. She baked chocolate cakes for all the birthdays, very good at shortbread. She was in Guiding, she was in W.I., as I was. She was a great walker, she was a historian, she was a great woman for stories and told all about various relations and stories about people in the area. ....she was a botanist, .....you know, she left school at 14, but she was a self-educated botanist. She went over all the Latin names for flowers.

This attention to professional and intellectual interest down the female line is a strong feature of Penny's interview. Whilst her father's jovial manner can be glimpsed in her testimony, it is



her mother's hard work, dynamism and enquiring mind that shines through most clearly. In describing the construction of the quilt, its functionality in respect of memory becomes clear:

And that was a button of her night-dress. So this was all made with her clothing, this was the jacket she was wearing, this was a dress, this was another ... it was quite difficult to put together, because this was silky material and this is cotton, so you know you were using different kinds of materials to... [it] could've twisted out of place very easily.

The different ways memory worked through things is an interesting dimension in these interviews. For some, the material manifestation of an object was the powerful factor, taking a person back to a specific time, place or person. For others, the objects could be constructed after the events they represent, memorialising particular people or experiences. Other objects functioned more as representations of a particular achievement or relationship, like the objects Ruth had collected while travelling abroad, things that reminded her of her adventures but which were not individually potent in the same way as other items. The only object Mary had not been sure about including was a copy of her doctoral thesis and this item operated differently in her interview, less materially resonant and designated as merely 'representational'. This was also the only object that she had needed to retrieve from storage and, as such, something that she had not chosen to bring to her temporary home as a matter of course.

Whilst based around personal possessions, the interviews are not a catalogue of things but a telling of the self. As such, the ways in which the participants presented themselves within their narrative is important. The participants gauged the expectations of the interviewer, sometimes checking that the result was on track. Ruth asked: 'is it relevant for you to ... do you want to know the sort of the career history bit or is that not relevant?' Penny concluded: 'That's everything, I'm sure you're bored silly' – modestly dismissing the value of her testimony. But despite any passing doubts, the three women all offered robust, purposeful accounts of parts of their lives. Ruth's interview provided the most narrative detail and, as it starts in adulthood, her discourse focuses very strongly on self-determination. Ruth is firmly in control of her own narrative, asserting: 'Yep, drumming is very positive you see. Drumming is very good for the soul and it's very empowering for women', 'You know, you've got to be a self-starter' and 'Circus is quite life changing. I'm a real zealot, I'm an evangelist.' Of the three women interviewed, Ruth's transcript is the one least influenced by

the introduction of objects retaining a flow of subjects and thoughts that had been given previous consideration by the participant. Penny's discourse is less explicitly about empowerment, but there is a firm authority in her statements about her achievements:

I went off to Finland for a month, got married in December and went off in July to Finland for a month and it was through Guiding. ... that was a young leaders gathering in Finland, and through that I had a trip right up into the Arctic Circle, which was very exciting.

As a researcher herself, Mary was the participant most familiar with the interview scenario, although with roles reversed. Of the three participants, she drew out the connections between the objects, their meanings and her life most fully. Her damaged teddy bear prompting the reflection:

I think to me there's a slight metaphor here, 'cause this is the way life is... metaphorically the dog of life comes and eats your face off [laugh], it happens, you know and you just move on, you know.

She distinguished between the sensory and the symbolic, untangling layers of personal meaning from larger cultural associations:

I think the dresser is very symbolic, and I don't know about maybe, in your part of the world, whether it would be the same. ... I lived in the West of Ireland for quite a while, and down there, like the dresser, ... the dresser is THE THING. ... [It refers to] the woman's realm, or that rite of passage or that sort of notion of domesticity continuing across the generation.

## **Conclusions and Reflections**

In conclusion, this exploratory research found objects to be a useful medium for connecting with older women's lives over many decades, helping to explore women's ageing in several ways. First, it is worth reflecting on the role of the objects in helping the women to narrate their life experiences. The benefits of using objects, as opposed to a straightforward narrative interview were surprising to us as experienced qualitative researchers. The objects offered a tangible link to the past, or to a person who had passed. *Objects allowed the interviewee to show, not just tell how important a person, a relationship or an experience was to her.* For

younger researchers such as ourselves, it was enlightening and engaging to be drawn into the world of the past through the objects. The objects (such as Mary's mountain bike) also allowed us to see the everyday from the perspective of someone older than ourselves. It is hard to imagine how similar insights could be drawn from conducting the same interviews without the guiding frame of the participant's personal possessions. So, our reflections substantiate what was found in the project evaluation - that the women's narration of their own life course was aided by speaking about their objects.<sup>6</sup> The objects foregrounded a different range of life events and relationships and did so in ways that offered deeper insight into the meanings of those times, places and people.

As researchers we found the objects ignited deeper discussion at interview, and even more strikingly at the public exhibition. As this article is based on the interview data only, we have offered evidence from those interviews of women clearly articulating their experience of navigating a long life course. Through their engagement with the accumulated meaning of their chosen objects, these women expressed a range of identities, sometimes adapting and changing according to what life threw at them. Objects such as nappy pins and children's toys were used by the women to demonstrate the intense experience of motherhood, a painful but enriching aspect of life. Sometimes, creative interventions with material things and images formed part of a personal curatorial practice, a habit that pre-figured participating in this project. Objects such as passports and travel memorabilia were used to demonstrate self-determination, adventure and escape from the sometimes stifling experience of living within prescribed gender roles in twentieth-century Ireland.

The most interesting finding was that objects can provide a window on the sometimes contradictory experience of women's ageing. None of the women sanitised their life histories. They were as keen to include objects that had sad associations, for example, the spoon that belonged to Penny's late sister, as happy emblems of success, such as Mary's bike which reminded her of her flourishing relationships with children and grandchildren. Their object-based discourse moved deftly between the symbolic and the affective and made connections between their experiences and larger social and cultural currents. The objects prompted them to describe their lives in different ways – ways that were rooted, inter-connected and emotionally illuminating. The women's ageing is both a fact of life, and a changing status. They have acquired years of perspective which allows them to 'move on' when the metaphorical dog of life has ravaged them. They find comfort in relationships, they

understand loss, and they choose to focus on experiences that have formed them, rather than those that have been particularly pleasant or comfortable.

All three of the women used their objects as symbols of the complex and subtle negotiations that make up relationships they have enjoyed or lost at various points in their life course. In this way, objects could be an important means of helping older women to communicate the significant impact of relationships in helping them to understand their place in the world once they reach old age. Objects also provide a tangible link to relationships that have formed them as individuals, but which may now be lost due to death, or the passage of time. In tracing their life histories, relationships with others formed a central focus – both as a means of creating narrative structure and as a way of making sense of the self. Objects were able to tunnel into very specific moments that shed light on the character of those relationships.

While none of the participants explicitly referred to the need to be an example to younger women, both Mary and Penny honoured their inheritance from previous generations of women. Mary referred to receiving her mother's dresser as a 'rite of passage' and Penny's determined progress through life seemed to mirror the sense of purpose that defined her mother's life; a characteristic which Penny later captured in the quilt she made after her mother's death. Penny, at eighty years of age, offers plenty of evidence in response to Ray Karpen's questions about what career women do with their retirement; write a book, join a club, work for the community and take part in research.

The analysis presented here suggests that material culture has a potential role in communicating the complexity of living a long life to younger generations. Engaging seriously and methodically with our older generations' material pasts and presents could make a major contribution in terms of increasing public understanding of what it means to live a long life. Such a serious debate, informed by the lived experience of ageing is a vital stage that we must not miss as we make the transition to a long-lived society and culture.

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<sup>1</sup> As a pilot project, the selection process prioritised participants who were able to commit to the project's activities, the only criteria being that they were over 60 years old, 50 percent men and 50 percent women and that they lived within easy reaching distance of where the arts workshop and exhibition were to be held.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://gemmahodge.com/> [accessed 18 January 2018].

<sup>3</sup> <https://thelivelyproject.wordpress.com/> [accessed 8 August 2017].

<sup>4</sup> Bernard et. al. (2017) 'The Ageing of British Gerontology' exhibition material.

<sup>5</sup> By contrast, Ruth had experimented with Facebook but found that this medium could reveal her life to a very large audience. She preferred instead the more intimate practice of making photo collages that represented the people that really mattered in her life.

<sup>6</sup> The evaluation included a reflective focus group with all six participants, who expressed surprise at the extent to which the objects helped them to talk about their past.